

MRS. LINDE, FEMINISM, AND WOMEN'S WORK, THEN AND NOW

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To call Ibsen a feminist playwright or to describe *A Doll's House* as a drama in favor of women's rights is no longer controversial. For this, we have a series of scholars to thank. They include Katharine M. Rogers, who, in her 1985 essay "A Doll House in a Course on Women in Literature," confronted "the critical opinion that Ibsen was not concerned specifically with women's freedom" and declared that it had "no credibility."¹ We must also acknowledge the work of Gail Finney in her groundbreaking chapter, "Ibsen and Feminism," for the 1994 volume, *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. In Finney's view, Ibsen showed great "sensitivity to feminist issues,"² created "emancipated women characters,"³ and endorsed "the belief that a woman's mind and body are hers to control as she wishes."⁴ And we must honor the contribution of Joan Templeton who, in her 1997 book *Ibsen's Women*, established that "Nora's doll house and exit from it have long been principal international symbols for women's issues"⁵ and that Ibsen himself "was not only interested in women's rights, but engaged in the battle."⁶ So convincing have these scholars' arguments been that it is hard to recall that there was ever disagreement on this point, or that an earlier generation of Ibsenists proclaimed just as confidently that Ibsen was uninterested in gender politics.

But to say that Ibsen was a champion of nineteenth century women should be the start, not the endpoint, of discussion. What sort of feminism did he advocate in *A Doll's House*, and through what means did he articulate this political stance? And why should it matter to anyone now to know the answer to such questions? Gail Finney has said that Ibsen's work "allies him with feminist thinkers not only of his era but of our own day as well,"⁷ suggesting that the struggles experienced by his characters are still relevant and that the dramatist has something useful to say to a modern audience. What, precisely, does Ibsen wish to tell us about women

and their lives in this, his most famous and influential play? How much can we identify with the conflicts it details?

As we think about these matters, we need to move beyond the many analyses that focus on Nora Helmer alone. Nora is one of the most fully dissected creations in literature, and there are ample studies both of her psychology and of her symbolic function in *A Doll's House*. In terms of feminism, moreover, she represents a battle already won and, in many cultures in the world, no longer remarkable. The demands she embodies – to be regarded as an autonomous adult, to determine her own system of beliefs, to enjoy a marriage that is a partnership, and to be able to leave the domestic sphere, including her husband and her children, in pursuit of self-development – would hardly be deemed shocking anymore, at least in middle-class circles, whether in the West, Asia, or Africa, although these were unprecedented demands in 1879.

If we find relevance in the play now, however, it probably will not be located in what Joan Templeton describes as “its dramatization of the flowering of one woman’s consciousness.”⁸ During the shift from Second Wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s into the Third Wave feminism of the 1990s through the present, we have seen a sharp turn away from the notion that any one woman – or any one woman’s consciousness – can stand in for all others. Among the profound changes in feminist thinking of the past twenty years has been a new skepticism about the idea of the “universal” female figure, a retreat from the concept of “sisterhood,” and a fresh emphasis instead upon recognizing difference and diversity of identity and of experience. Nora can no longer be understood as representing “Everywoman.”

From this perspective, *A Doll's House* becomes more than a play about Nora; it is also a drama about the female characters who exist on the margins, such as the working-class women servants who run the Helmer household. These include “Anne Marie,” identified in the stage directions only by the generic title of “Nursemaid” or, in other translations, “Nurse.” Through her dialogue with Nora, we learn that long ago she had to give up her own daughter, who was born out of wedlock, in order to take the job of raising Nora. Although elderly, she still must go on working as the caretaker of the next generation of middle-class children. To attend to her

presence is to see a troubling blindspot in Ibsen's presentation of the case on behalf of women. Unlike her female employer, Anne Marie demonstrates no discontent with her narrow domestic role, with her inability to mother her own child, or with the injustice of the consequences of a sexual double standard. As she explains patiently to Nora, who wonders whether the sacrifice of her baby was either easy or necessary, "Well, there was nothing else for it when I had to come and nurse my little Nora," for "a poor girl who's been in trouble" must do whatever she can to get "such a good place." Her criticism – unlike Nora's famous speeches in Act Three – is directed not against any social or gender hierarchies, but merely against the particular "rotter" who left her pregnant.⁹

Ibsen's lack of interest in protesting the circumstances or exploring further the consciousness of this figure (or that of the otherwise unknown Helene, Nora's maid) reproduces one strain of class-specific late-nineteenth century feminism. We can find a similar attitude, for instance, in the feminist fiction of Ella Hepworth Dixon, a British "New Woman" writer of the 1890s. Her 1894 novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, details the frustrations of a middle-class heroine who chafes under the patriarchal restrictions imposed on her life. But Dixon passes over without comment the presence of a seamstress in the household who labors for the protagonist, named Mary Erle, and Dixon's narrator endorses Mary's dismissive view of this working-class woman as a "drab-complexioned girl, whose fat hand moved, as she sewed, with the regularity of a machine." The narrator sums up the seamstress merely as "a docile, humble, uncomplaining creature, who suggested inevitably some patient domestic animal."¹⁰

It would take the Irish writer George Moore's popular novel of the same year, 1894, to explode this picture of the "docile" domestic. In *Esther Waters*, Moore allows the poor servant girl who becomes pregnant out of wedlock a voice of her own and a cry of outrage against the expectation that she should give up her baby, and perhaps allow it to die, in order to serve as nurse to a richer woman's child. Esther denounces her employer, saying, "It is wicked of you to speak like that, ma'am, though it is I who am saying it. It is none of the child's fault if he hasn't got a father, nor is

it right that he should be deserted for that, and it is not for you to tell me to do such a thing.... But when you hire a poor girl such as me ...you think nothing of the poor deserted one.”¹¹ George Moore fleshes out the character of the female servant and allows her a political consciousness, however, not out of feminist solidarity with the woman's plight, but as part of his project of literary naturalism – of examining the invisible lives at the bottom of the British social hierarchy.

Ibsen's feminism was no more or less limited by class biases than that of many writers and activists of the late nineteenth century. His portrayal of the working-class woman is also surprisingly relevant today. In our global economy, freedom from domestic toil for the educated, middle-class women who are Nora's descendants is still largely dependent upon someone known only as “Nurse,” though she is now more usually an immigrant from a poorer country. As Rosie Cox points out in *The Servant Problem: Domestic Employment in a Global Economy*, her study of the domestic labor market in twenty-first century Britain, “Global inequalities in income and opportunity provide British families with access to a cheap and plentiful supply of cleaners and childcarers.”¹² Like Anne Marie, the female domestic worker or childminder today is often someone who has left behind a family of her own in order to earn her livelihood. And her middle-class employer is just as likely to accept the notion – the comforting fiction, if you will – that the employee is happy with such an arrangement and with the lack of choice. So, too, the modern employer will accept without question what Nora does: that a caretaker will transfer her loyalty to the children she is paid to raise and will be contented, as Anne Marie claims to be, with a relationship to her biological daughter that consists merely of letters. In answer to Nora's suggestion that her child must have forgotten her mother, Anne Marie replies, “Oh no, she hasn't. She wrote to me when she got confirmed, and again when she got married” (236).

In other words, when we look at *A Doll's House* from a perspective that takes us beyond Nora, we find a play that argues for women's equality, but that does not apply this argument with an even hand, particularly when it comes to the question of women's work. Female servants were, of course, minor players at

best in virtually all Western dramas of the late nineteenth century, and we cannot fault Ibsen for failing to overturn every social and theatrical convention in a single drama. That he assigned to Anne Marie any dialogue at all distinguishes him from large numbers of his contemporary playwrights, who usually confined servants' speaking parts to the mere announcement of visitors' names.

Some critics have gone farther, though, suggesting that Ibsen must indeed have viewed Anne Marie's role as an important one, since it provides a parallel to Nora's situation. Bernard F. Dukore, for example, sees Anne Marie embodying Ibsen's understanding of what he calls the "lower classes," whose lives are defined by economics and who have no higher aspirations: "Among the lower classes, money means survival, and considerations of independence are irrelevant. To Anne-Marie [sic]...money is necessary to survive, and that is all there is to it.... Anne-Marie [sic] did not abandon her child in order to fulfill herself as a free, independent human being.... She gave her child to others because she could not afford to do anything else."¹³ From such a perspective, it might be possible to consider Anne Marie's unprotesting acceptance of her limited choices as merely an attempt, on Ibsen's part, to reproduce working-class realities, rather than as a reflection of the dramatist's own lack of interest in how the gender system imposed particularly unjust burdens on a working-class woman's experience of maternity – far harsher than on that of her middle-class counterpart.

Dukore certainly supplies a more charitable interpretation of Ibsen's attitude toward Anne Marie than does Richard Hornby. In his 1981 *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays*, Hornby, too, posits Anne Marie as a parallel figure for Nora. Yet for him, she is a wholly negative exemplar, illustrating a bestial and unreflective – almost a post-Darwinian – version of the maternal from which Nora eventually must lift herself: "Anne-Marie's [sic] love for children, like Nora's, is juvenile or animal-like. She loves them deeply when they are actually there, and forgets them when they are not; she has shifted easily from her own child to Nora, and then from Nora to Nora's children, and no doubt would shift just as easily to someone else's children if it should become necessary."¹⁴ Hornby's vision of Ibsen, it seems, admits no possibility of the playwright as intending

to convey a sympathetic appreciation of either the economic or gender-based exigencies that confronted the nineteenth century working classes.

More revealing of Ibsen, however, as both a radical and a conservative commentator on gender is what he portrays through his other middle-class female character, Kristine Linde, and how he portrays it. If we view *A Doll's House* from a wider angle that examines Ibsen's feminism outside of its representation of Nora alone, what can we discover about and through her? Drawing her into the spotlight, we must defy the temptation to rest where generations of critics have stopped – i.e. with the understanding that her chief function is to serve throughout as a foil and as a contrast only to Nora. She does indeed fulfill that purpose, and Egil Törnqvist, in his 1995 study of *A Doll's House*, has outlined this position particularly well. As Törnqvist notes, “Mrs[.] Linde gains a family; Nora loses one.... This parallel helps to integrate Mrs[.] Linde in the play. In addition it creates an ironical, even mystical feeling that life repeats itself and that our fates as human beings are exchangeable.”¹⁵ Yet Mrs. Linde's subplot within the main plot may also illuminate some aspects of Ibsen's thinking about women that attention to Nora alone cannot render so clear. And as we begin to concentrate on Mrs. Linde, yet another, more shadowy, female figure will come gradually into focus as well: the late Mrs. Krogstad.

There have, of course, been critics (especially of late) who have attempted to lay out ways in which Mrs. Linde's function might go beyond that of merely paralleling Nora. Feminist commentators, in particular, have emphasized her active engagement in shaping, as well as interpreting, the choices and decisions that Nora makes, as well as the part she plays in influencing the audience's responses to Nora. In her 1999 *Henrik Ibsen*, Sally Ledger, for example, has stated that “It is Christine [sic] Linde who acts as a catalyst for Nora's rebellion.... Christine [sic] has, since her husband's death, been forced to live an independent life, and from this vantage point she is able to identify the rotten foundations of Nora's marriage.”¹⁶ More recently, Toril Moi has theorized that this character helpfully guides the viewers' stance toward Nora's performance in the crucial “tarantella” scene, preventing Nora from becoming a mere erotic

spectacle and from being consumed by the stage audience as she is by the men within the play. As Moi puts it, “what Kristine is [there] to see is not just Nora, but the relationship between Nora’s performance and the men’s gaze [;] Mrs[.] Linde sees Nora’s pain; she also sees that the men do not.” Thus, “the audience’s perspective is closer to Mrs[.] Linde’s than to the two men’s, for Mrs[.] Linde knows more than the men do about Nora’s deal with Krogstad.”¹⁷

Brian Johnston, on the other hand, has inverted the usual premise of Mrs. Linde as a parallel character and set her up as a moral antithesis. For him, Kristine is “Christian (or galilean)” in “her personal history of sacrifice.”¹⁸ Nora, though, “does not follow Kristine’s example, does not leave the doll home to sacrifice herself for others. Hers is the more selfish and ruthless decision to re-create herself in truth, if possible, whatever the consequences.”¹⁹ Yet even these revisionist perspectives continue to link Kristine chiefly, or even solely, to Nora, thus isolating her from possible connections to the situations of other female figures in the text and, in particular, obscuring her relationship to the woman who took her place in the Krogstad household.

Let us review briefly the facts about Kristine Linde familiar to anyone who has ever read *A Doll’s House* or seen it performed. Mrs. Linde appears early in Act One, a visitor to the Helmers’ home, in search of her old schoolmate, Nora. She has been a widow for three years, after marriage to a man whom she didn’t love. Unlike Nils Krogstad, the fiancé whom she abandoned some eight or nine years ago, her husband was financially well off and able to support her “bedridden and helpless” mother, along with the two young brothers who were also her responsibility (211). But Kristine Linde now describes herself as “bitter” (211), for her husband’s business collapsed at the time of his death, leaving her with “nothing” (208); her mother, too, has died, while her brothers are able to “look after themselves” and don’t “need” her anymore (211). After holding down a series of jobs to earn her livelihood, she arrives “worn out” and exhausted at Nora’s house (211). Soon, Nora’s husband Torvald offers her a clerical position at the bank which he manages, although it means firing Krogstad to give her this opportunity. In the course of the play, Mrs. Linde becomes Nora’s confidante,

learning that Nora, in order to save Torvald's life, once forged her father's signature on the guarantee of a loan and borrowed money from Krogstad, who has become her blackmailer.

At the start of Act Three, Mrs. Linde presents herself to Krogstad – not to rescue Nora, but to propose marriage and thus to give her own life purpose. Krogstad is a widower with “a lot of children” (217). “I need someone to mother, and your children need a mother,” she tells him (265). Krogstad accepts her offer gladly and gratefully, exclaiming, “I’ve never been so incredibly happy before,” while Kristine Linde says to herself in joyous anticipation, “Somebody to work for ...to live for [ellipses in original]. A home to bring happiness into” (266). Theirs, the audience is meant to feel, is the best ending possible. As Bernard F. Dukore puts it, in an essay titled, “Money, Survival, and Independence in *A Doll's House*,” “their emotional interdependence and mutual love, candor, and sense of responsibility supersede the question of independence,”²⁰ which is, of course, one of the serious political questions raised by Nora's union with Torvald.

Yet, if the critic Egil Törnqvist is correct and Ibsen has constructed this drama through parallels, with Mrs. Linde brought onto the scene to embody both contrasts and resemblances, then we must acknowledge that she is not a foil to Nora alone. On the contrary, her character also develops its meaning in relation to the figure of the dead wife and the dead mother whom she replaces. Who was the first Mrs. Krogstad, and what does the play tell us about her?

The first thing we know is that she was the wife of a man who married her without loving her, for his heart belonged to Kristine. Indeed, Kristine accepted an offer of marriage from a man she did not love, but did so for reasons of family duty, in aid of her invalid mother and dependent young brothers. There is certainly no suggestion, however, that the late Mrs. Krogstad was rich, anymore than was Krogstad himself. The family appears to have lived on the edge financially, with Krogstad scrabbling for money through his low-level clerical work and also through dishonest means. Whatever brought or kept them together involved neither romance nor economics. In the 1961 Oxford University Press edition of *A Doll's House*, James McFarlane has translated and published Ibsen's

earlier draft of the play, which gives us more information about this relationship. There, Nora Helmer, who instead bears the name “Mrs. Stenborg,” informs Mrs. Linde about Krogstad’s circumstances:

MRS. STENBORG: His marriage wasn’t a very happy one, I believe.

MRS. LINDE: He’s a widower now, isn’t he?

MRS. STENBORG: With a lot of children. (298–99)

A few moments later, “Dr. Hank,” as the character who would later become Dr. Rank is called in this draft, appears and continues the topic:

DOCTOR: Yes, if Krogstad had had a home situated, so to speak, on the sunny side of life, with all its spiritual windows facing the light and not towards the damned, cold, clammy north—and I know him—I’m ready to state that he would have become quite a decent person, like the rest of us.

MRS. LINDE: Isn’t he?

DOCTOR: Can’t be. Impossible. His marriage was all against it. An unhappy marriage is like a kind of small-pox ...it leaves pockmarks on the soul, Mrs. Linde. (299)

Two things are striking in Ibsen’s description of this relationship. The first is that it was so “unhappy” that its unsatisfactory nature was apparent even to outsiders and acquaintances in the community. The second is that, nonetheless, it produced “a lot of children” – precisely how many, we never learn. Presumably, though, Nora’s use of the term “a lot” must indicate that there were more of them than the three she has herself.

We are left, then, with a distinct impression of Krogstad – the same character whom we are asked to accept later as half of a new kind of partnership of equals and as someone who demonstrates, in Dukore’s words, “love, candor, and sense of responsibility”²¹; we are left with an impression of him as a man who ignored the misery that he both felt and caused, continued to sleep with an “unhappy”

Mrs. Linde, Feminism, and Women's Work, Then and Now

woman, and went on impregnating her, again and again, until she died. The atmosphere of their household may have seemed “damned, cold, [and] clammy” to others. But for the cause of that unfortunate environment, we may well look to the Krogstad bedroom, where the husband repeatedly exercised what the nineteenth century understood to be a husband’s rights.

Yet it is equally clear that Ibsen wishes to present Krogstad to us as guiltless in his domestic conduct and as scarcely culpable in his dishonest business dealings. The blame falls instead on Kristine Linde. In both the earlier manuscript draft and in the revised version of *A Doll House*, Krogstad charges her with his fall into misery and crime, and she does not deny responsibility. Krogstad tells Kristine, “When I lost you, it was just as if the ground had slipped away from under my feet. Look at me now: a broken man clinging to the wreck of his life” (263). Instead of countering this implicit accusation, Kristine responds, “Help might be near” (263) – meaning, of course, that she herself equals “Help.” Soon she is saying to him,

MRS. LINDE: Just now you hinted you thought you might have been a different person with me.

KROGSTAD: I’m convinced I would.

MRS. LINDE: Couldn’t it still happen? (265)

Here we can see both the progressive character of Ibsen’s feminism and, simultaneously, the conservative, even backward, nature of his attitudes about gender. In a shocking reversal of conventions of feminine passivity, it is the woman here who takes charge of the scene and, as the critic John Northam notes, “proposes marriage.”²² Alongside this action, however, is clear evidence of the survival of an ideology that had long proved disabling to women’s ambitions and damaging to their autonomy throughout the nineteenth century, an ideology that defined women as the moral guardians of men and as the good angels necessary to their uplift. Immediately following Kristine’s proposal, the conversation continues with Krogstad “seizing her hands” and gushing, “Thank you, thank you, Kristine. And I’ll soon have everybody looking up to me, or I’ll

know the reason why" (265). Kristine, who allegedly caused Krogstad's fall by abandoning him, will now perform her needed function and restore him to his pedestal. Ibsen presents unironically a relationship that harks back to such earlier literary pairings as David Copperfield and his second wife, Agnes, in Charles Dickens's 1850 novel, where the chapter that unites the erring hero with the woman who leads him "upward"²³ is titled "A Light Shines on My Way."²⁴ Kristine Linde becomes Nils Krogstad's light.

A later generation of feminist writers in Britain would disavow the assumptions that underpin this scene in Ibsen's play. The 1898 novel *A Writer of Books*, for instance, by Emily Morse Symonds, the "New Woman" author who published under the pseudonym of "George Paston," exposes how self-serving and manipulative was the argument that women should be the preservers of men's morality. When the heroine of *A Writer of Books* attempts to free herself from an unwise engagement, her fiancé showers her with dire threats and predictions:

You can't mean that you want to throw me over at the last moment, to make me a laughing-stock before the world, and ruin my whole life? I warn you that I should never care for anyone or believe in anyone again if you were to play me such a trick. I should simply cut the whole thing, and go to the dogs.²⁵

To claim that her influence is all that stands between him and the grim fate of going "to the dogs" is merely a way of maintaining control over her through guilt – not unlike Nils Krogstad's insistence to Kristine, "But you had no right to throw me over for somebody else," and his assurance that her doing so turned him into "a broken man clinging to the wreck of his life" (261). Indeed, the earlier draft version of *A Doll's House* elaborates on the neediness of men, as beings who are morally dependent on women. There, Doctor Hank [sic] asserts that a happy marriage "acts like a course of spa treatment. It drives all the poisoned elements out, and encourages the development of everything in a man that is good and useful" (300).

Mrs. Linde, Feminism, and Women's Work, Then and Now

Unfortunately, Ibsen's characters in this 1879 play have not yet traveled as far as they should from the notorious mid-Victorian pronouncements of the British social critic, John Ruskin. In his 1865 lecture, "Of Queens Gardens," Ruskin advised that the home must be ruled by a woman who is "enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise ...wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side."²⁶ With Kristine to guide him, Nils Krogstad ceases to blackmail Nora Helmer about her forged loan: "Mrs. Linde's determination to marry him and be a mother to his children has," as the critic Lou Salomé says, "an ennobling ...effect upon him."²⁷ But that does not mean he has stopped using emotional blackmail with women, although the playwright seems blind to the anti-feminist implications of a doctrine that claims men need women to drive out their "poisoned elements" and that it is women's implicit duty to perform this service.

When we look, therefore, beyond the radical use that Ibsen makes of Nora and concentrate upon Mrs. Linde as well, we confront some attitudes related to gender that we might not anticipate. These identify the playwright as a man of his own times, rather than wholly of ours. Yet there are other features that make *A Doll's House* all too modern and relevant – that show how little change has occurred, especially in terms of the issue of women's work, with which Mrs. Linde, more than Nora Helmer, is associated.

Kristine Linde does not propose marriage to Krogstad merely in order to rescue him from his moral failings and lead him toward his better self. She has another motive, one related to her own history. Ibsen has framed that history, though, in a way that is contradictory and filled with inconsistencies, undercutting the realism of his own otherwise realistic play. That the drama's credibility would slip so badly, whenever Ibsen treats the topic of the woman who has earned her own living in the public sphere, suggests how fully his art was shaped by the ambivalence of nineteenth century culture toward the idea of the middle-class woman as a worker – an ambivalence that the twenty-first century continues to share.

"All my life I have worked, for as long as I can remember; that has always been my one great joy," Mrs. Linde tells Krogstad in Act

Three (264). Yet nothing that she has already said in Act One about her past substantiates the claim that work has ever been a pleasure to her. Instead, she has spoken to Nora only of being “proud and happy” in the knowledge that her work benefited someone else – that is, her mother and brothers. Indeed, the work itself has left her, as Nora Helmer notices at once, “worn out” and looking desperate for a holiday (211). When Kristine Linde describes what she has done to earn her living since her husband’s death, she recites a list of activities in which she was emotionally unengaged: “Well, I had to fend for myself, opening a little shop, running a little school, anything I could turn my hand to. These last three years have been one long relentless drudge” (211). There is no sign here that she found her labors rewarding, even when they involved the education of children, a career that might seem to have offered what she claims most to require – someone else “to work for” (211).

This representation of the middle-class woman as uninspired by her career, including her career as a teacher, runs directly counter to the historical evidence reported by feminist historians such as Martha Vicinus. In her 1985 study titled *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920*, Vicinus records how “Middle-class single women...believed passionately” in the “redeeming power of work; paid public work would give them dignity and independence.”²⁸ These women, moreover, enjoyed networks of female friends and, in the case of the heads of schools, emotionally intimate relationships with pupils and with other teachers. They were not, as Kristine declares herself to be, “completely alone in the world, and feeling horribly empty and forlorn” (264). Ibsen employs Mrs. Linde here to flesh out not a feminist, but an anti-feminist argument of the sort outlined later by the Latvian-born essayist Laura Marholm (1854–1928), wife of the writer Ola Hansson, in her 1899 book, *The Psychology of Women*. There, Marholm considers the paid labors of middle-class women and asserts that

the struggle between man and woman for the mouthful of bread is the most unnatural of all struggles.

And what the woman does in the departments which she has conquered in the struggle for existence,—is it any more than

Mrs. Linde, Feminism, and Women's Work, Then and Now

unproductive work, work in which her innermost woman-nature, her need of expansion, her enthusiasm, her emotions, lie fallow; work in which her woman-substance fades, in which she is unsexed?²⁹

The answer, says Marholm, is for women to dedicate themselves to the labor for which they were biologically programmed: "The best work which the woman can create, and in which her productivity is complete, undiminished and enduring, – is the child."³⁰ Thus, Kristine Linde begs Krogstad to be allowed to perform this other sort of work: "I need someone to mother, and your children need a mother" (265). So important is it, in the scheme of Ibsen's play, that she be led by this primal urge and articulate this plea for someone "to care about ...and...to care for" (264) that the playwright asks us to overlook the unreality of her proposal. She has never met these children; she does not even know how old they are; in fact, she does not even know how many of them Krogstad has, since the play contains no dialogue that would communicate these details.

But this is hardly the biggest gap in realism, when it comes to Ibsen's portrait of the working woman. There is also the matter of finances. Her husband's death, as Kristine tells Nora, left her with "Nothing at all" (208), for his business "was shaky. When he died, it went to pieces, and there just wasn't anything left" (211). To Nora's question "What then?" she responds that she opened a shop, then ran a school (211). How? The story of Nora's borrowing money demonstrates that women were not legally eligible for credit; they had to have a man guarantee their loans. That is why Nora committed forgery. Kristine had no one but her underage brothers and thus would have been as unable to secure a loan as Nora had been.

Clearly, Ibsen did not feel it necessary to reconcile such inconsistencies in his text. All that mattered, for his purposes, was to make his character state that she had the full range of experiences – from sales work, to teaching, to office work – common to self-supporting, middle-class women and then for her to dismiss all of them as "empty" and miserable ones for a woman who lacks someone to "mother." As Bjørn Hemmer has said, "For an understanding of the thematic structure of the drama, Kristine

Linde's declaration that she needs somebody *to live for* is an essential part of the whole"³¹ [italics in original]. Such a declaration seems not only thematically essential to Ibsen, but ideologically imperative as well.

I began by suggesting that the majority of the feminist arguments that Nora, Ibsen's protagonist, embodies have been won. A century and a half of campaigns for legal, political, and economic justice have earned many women around the world the right no longer to be dolls, locked up in doll houses. Yet, if we explore the situation and dialogue of Mrs. Linde, we also have a different window on the present, enabling us to see how and where some gender attitudes have remained unexpectedly retrograde and unchanged.

In the United States, at least, there is currently no issue more passionately controversial, particularly in the mainstream media, than the question of whether paid work or the raising of their own children should be the focus of women's lives, particularly of middle-class women. As recently as 17 May 2006, an editorial by Anne Applebaum in the *Washington Post*, a national newspaper, fanned this dispute anew by entering what it characterized as "the roiling waters of the current debate, if that is what it can be called, over motherhood, children and work."³² The past year has seen an outpouring of such articles, along with the publication of numerous books devoted to what are often called "The Mommy Wars." Recognizing that equal dedication to the demands of a career and to family life often prove incompatible, female authors – both those who identify as feminists and those who do not – have been directing their anger at women who choose one path or the other, as well as at the lack of supportive social services in the United States, a lack which forces women into this choice. Sometimes, these debates have been shouting matches over the specifics of child care – whether it ought to be provided by the government, as it is in most of the developed nations of the world, but also over whether a mother really ought to be raising her own child instead. That these issues still rouse such furious disagreement suggests that Anna Fels, a psychiatrist and author, is correct in her recent observation that "the massive transformation of American women's lives that has occurred over the last two centuries is still incomplete."³³ It is a statement seconded by Mariah Boone,

writing in the feminist polemical journal *Off Our Backs*: "It feels as if our revolution got stuck somewhere before it was finished."³⁴

Beneath many of these disputes in the media over middle-class women's careers, moreover, lies the seemingly ineradicable belief that a woman is happiest and most fulfilled not by work, but by heterosexual marriage. So deeply held is this assumption that the American Association of Retired Persons, an advocacy organization for the middle-aged and elderly, felt it necessary to gauge its truth last year and to conduct a poll of "2,500 women ages 45 and older" who were single – either never married, divorced, or widowed. "Are unattached women sad, lonely, and financially troubled – as the stereotype would have it?" this survey set out to find. The results surprised the questioners, who discovered that the majority of women did not "long for love," but instead reported themselves as "happier than they've ever been."³⁵ Rather than confirming the myth that the "older they get, the more single women regret the lack of family ties," this survey established that "Unmarried women ...have stronger social support systems than married women do.... Even beyond blood family, contented single women knit together their own support systems of friends, colleagues, neighbors, and others."³⁶

We must return again to the glaring inconsistencies in Ibsen's portrait of Mrs. Linde, which illuminate so well the enduring myths about working women and single women in the playwright's day and in our own. Why is this character so isolated and, as she says, among the "castaways"? (264). Her younger brothers, on whose behalf she labored and who owe everything to her, are alive; she is not without family. Yet she perceives herself – and the audience, too, is asked to accept her – as being "completely alone in the world," until she is married once again (264).

Here, we come up against the limits of Ibsen's feminism. He was uninterested in considering whether women who have operated in the public sphere might be satisfied there. He assumes that Mrs. Linde, in the words of the critic John Northam, must have "found life profoundly depressing and aimless without the anchor of a husband and children."³⁷ But we also come up against our own prejudices, whenever we implicitly endorse this assumption. As Betty Israel states in her 2002 study, *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History*

of *Single Women in the Twentieth Century*, “the conviction that single women are social outcasts – odd women who require constant translation – remains intact,” as does the belief that they must always have before them an “uncertain future” and must experience “inevitable regret” of the very sort that Ibsen assigned to Kristine Linde more than one hundred years ago.³⁸

Through his daring and brilliant 1879 play, Ibsen helped to free the little bird from her cage and to rescue the middle-class woman, as toy and as child, from her playhouse. We cannot fault him for failing to do more – that is, for neglecting to liberate working-class women, too, or for refusing to demolish the stereotype of the single woman with a career as an incomplete human being. But we can fault ourselves. The “massive transformation” of women’s lives is “still incomplete.”³⁹ And it is up to us, not to Ibsen, to finish it.

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Mrs. Linde, Feminism, and Women's Work, Then and Now

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MARGARET D. STETZ

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